

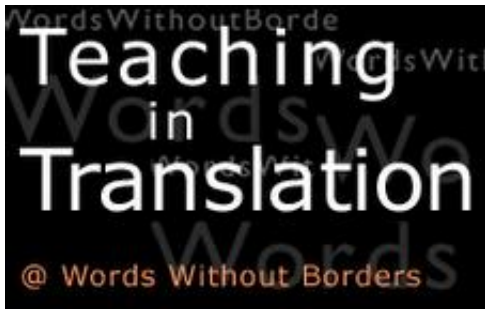
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The general membership meeting of the American Literary Translators Association's annual conference in October of this year went smoothly until the final item of business. The members present were sharply divided over the newly imposed rule stipulating that only books with the translator's name printed on the cover should be eligible for the National Translation Award, which is administered by that organization. The rationale for the new rule is clear enough — publishers should pay more attention, and encourage readers to pay more attention, to the fact of translation; and translators should be better recognized and acknowledged for their work. A familiar story. Requiring that only books with translators' names on their covers be eligible for the annual award was seen, by some ALTA members at least, as a form of slightly righteous pressure applied to the gatekeepers of publishing.

The problem was that the new rule had resulted in a marked decrease, by more than half from previous years, in the number of eligible applications. It appears that quite a few translations continue to be published without translators' names going on their covers. Members argued over whether to stick to the rule—and the principle behind it—or bow before the practical realities that (1) many publishers do not put translators' names on the outsides of books (and some make them almost un-traceable on the insides as well); (2) translators are not to blame for the fact that they have little or no power to force publishers to do so, which makes preventing them from entering their works for the award a rather

unfair constraint; and (3) ALTA's prize is not prestigious or noteworthy enough to put appropriate pressure, righteous or otherwise, on publishers to change the way they do business.

Business presumably is the main reason that large, commercial publishers are reluctant to follow the desired path of at least some ALTA members. An assumption on the part of the publishers remains palpable; that readers will at least hesitate if not turn resolutely away when confronted by the fact of a translated work, especially one by a relatively unknown author, relatively unknown translator, or both. They tend to see the highlighting of translation as an unnecessary and potentially harmful gesture—harmful to their own business interests, yes, but also harmful to the book, the author, the translator, and, in some cases, serious literature in general. If the book doesn't get into people's hands, after all, it doesn't help anyone; and in the highly competitive book market, where each new title is thought of as pushing another title off the shelf, an obviously translated work is less likely to be successful. Better to slip in the translation part, they suggest, without overt notice, or at least without slapping the reader in the face with the information. Let it perform whatever cross-cultural or other magic it might be capable of performing, but quietly, unobtrusively. Otherwise, you risk turning readers off, or at least encouraging them to make other choices from among the many they have. This is an assumption based not, to my knowledge, on any empirical evidence, but rather on a combination of anecdote, publishers' lore, and gut feeling.

In opposition stand those translators, like some of the most vociferous at the ALTA general meeting, who say that literature and translation have always gone hand in hand and always will; and that Americans are too insular as it is without having publishers shield them from the fact that there are great works in English that weren't originally written in English; and that this kind of action on the part of publishers is motivated by sheer ignorance, the shameful monolingualism of editors, or the undue influence of obtuse marketers who've never set foot out of New York City, let alone the U.S. of A. Would we have American readers think like Ma Ferguson, a former governor of Texas, who, when faced with the specter of allowing Spanish to be taught in the public schools, supposedly once said, "If English was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for the children of Texas?" These translators, then, insist that we should do something that's within our power, or close to it, and remind people of the fact of translation every chance we get, and of the considerable role that translators play in the creation of literature, openly acknowledging that work and the expertise, skill, and art that translators bring to it.

They are speaking at cross purposes in most of this, of course; the publishers nervous about sales and the potential effect of complicating the message, the translators angry and sensitive about not being taken seriously. It would help a lot to have some good survey data that might help answer the basic question behind the publishers' assumption: are readers really less likely to pick up a translated book in a bookstore when they can clearly see that it's been translated? No one really knows. I hope that some budding translation studies scholar will take on the very important work of providing an answer that's based on more than what I have to offer here.

This audience may not be pleased to hear it, but I tend to agree with the publishers in this instance at least, partly because the retail sales market is really no place to be teaching people in anything but the most subtle of ways. Mainly, though, I think this because of a look I've seen on people's faces, the faces of students, colleagues, and administrators in academic settings, and those of friends, neighbors, and family outside them. I understand the look as reflecting a slight insecurity with shades of bewilderment, a slow souring of expression that appears whenever I speak about the fact of translation, its invisible pervasiveness. There may be a little guilt in it too, for not having studied their Spanish or German lessons more diligently when they were in school, or something like that, I'm not sure. But I've seen the look many times and am no longer really surprised by it. My conclusion is that translations do tend to make many people nervous, and that publishers' lore has something to it on that score.

It's not a reason to give up the fight, or accept an unreflective invisibility. On the contrary, I see it as a provocation to expand the battlefield. Some translation scholars see the question of placing or not placing translators' names on the covers of books as a sort of teaching moment for the general reading public, envisioned as myriad Ma Fergusons willfully ignoring the fact that Jesus didn't speak, nor Tolstoy nor Dante write, in English. It may be such a moment, but even so it is a terribly minor one, misplaced, I would argue, in the retail bookstore, and in any case unlikely to have much consequence when pursued in isolation. The relative neglect of translation in the educational system is the larger and much more fecund teaching territory I would like to focus on, by suggesting key domains in which engaging translations —reading them and writing them—can serve a fundamentally transformative role in people's reading practices in general, both inside and outside the classroom.

Russell Scott Valentino is professor of Slavic and comparative literature and chair of the [Department of Cinema and Comparative Literature \(http://www.uiowa.edu/ccl/\)](http://www.uiowa.edu/ccl/) at the University of Iowa. He has published a monograph on nineteenth-century Russian literature and seven book-length literary translations from Italian, Croatian, and Russian. His essays, translated fiction, and poetry have appeared in journals such as *The Iowa Review*, *Two Lines*, *POROI*, *Circumference*, *Asia*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Slavic Review*, and *91st Meridian*. He is the recipient of a 2002 NEA Literature Fellowship and a 2004 Howard Foundation fellowship, both for literary translation, as well as two Fulbright research awards to Croatia. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of [Autumn Hill Books \(http://www.autumnhillbooks.org/\)](http://www.autumnhillbooks.org/) and in fall 2009 will become Editor of [The Iowa Review \(http://www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/\)](http://www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/). He teaches in the Translation Workshop at the University of Iowa.

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